

Essay

Remarkable Experiences

Every so often, we quietly think to ourselves about the world we are living in. We see images on the news that we can't get out of our head.

We hear harsh phrases in the city and on the streets, phrases that we can't seem to forget. We remember these things because they hurt us in a way. And we are hurt because we simply care too much.

But what we see on the news, and how we react to each event, tells us a lot about how we live. Some may think, "They caught him; he must be punished," while others may think, "That person didn't make the right choices in life." Some think, "If that person were loved, would he have done such a thing?"

I talk of these things as if I had the answers, but I don't. I am not one without skeletons in the closet. I did bad things when I was a kid, such as stealing. When I stole, I didn't even think twice. But in my mind, I tried to justify my action. I did it because I thought I deserved something. I did it because I felt that I wasn't being appreciated enough as a kid. I felt that everything I did was taken for granted and that, in some way, I needed an award. I didn't think anyone was paying attention, so I took the chance.

That is the absolute truth.

I look back at the way I reasoned, and I laugh. I don't want my story to sound like some stupid kid out for attention, or a mere child who thought he could cheat the store out of some money. My story reflects the severe delusions of a good kid. I thought that I was a good boy my whole life. And since I never got anything material for being good, why not take it?

But whom was I kidding? What I did wasn't poetic. It's not like I was stealing a loaf of bread. I was not the center of the universe that I thought I was. And the truth is, I didn't earn what I stole—and the police made that clear. When the police talked to my parents and me, all I wanted was to disappear from the face of the earth.

Joshua M.

Joshua M. is an alumnus of the Sacramento Neighborhood Accountability Board (NAB), a diversion program for first-time juvenile offenders. The program operates under the leadership of the Sacramento County Probation Department in partnership with agencies and citizens of the city and county of Sacramento. The program offers concerned citizens an opportunity to deal with juvenile crime in their own neighborhoods. Volunteers sit on hearing panels and draft contracts to hold young offenders accountable for their offenses. The contracts may require community service, curfew compliance, restitution, school attendance, and other sanctions. ■

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Then, the Neighborhood Accountability Board accepted me into their program. NAB taught me a lot of things—a lot of important things that I will never forget. I wrote apology letters to my parents and to the store, which were very difficult to write at the time. But I learned how to apologize. And I received the care of about six volunteer members from NAB.

They also let me tutor these elementary school kids at a local church. These children were fantastic. They looked up to me because ... well ... I'm a tall guy. They also looked up to me because they thought I was an excellent math teacher. I helped them with their times tables and their reading. When I saw these kids, it brightened up my day. These children gave me such joy because they needed me. I had the maturity to understand that rewards come in different forms.

When NAB said I was finished, I continued on with my life. At first I tried to block it all out of my mind, like a dream. I tried not to think about everything that had happened because I wanted to forget that person that I was. I tried to deny having ever stolen anything. I wanted to have nothing to do with any of that. I wanted the past to leave me alone. I wanted to leave. I wanted to change. I wanted everyone to forget about me. I wanted to take my past and bury it. Despite all the joy and pain it brought me, I wanted to lock it up and never see it again.

I wish I hadn't stolen anything. But I'm glad the Neighborhood Accountability Board saw that I was a good person inside. For a time in my life, I wanted to keep it hidden because stealing is not something to be proud of. When I went to school, I was just a regular guy. My friends talked to me like I was still the same Joshua, and I enjoyed being a normal kid again. But there was a fear inside of me that I had to live with: What if someone found out what I had done? What would they think of me then?

And soon normal life began to bore me. I thought to myself that playing by the rules and being a good boy wasn't enough. Suddenly I found a strange emptiness in my heart. And there was something from my previous life that I could not forget: those little kids! NAB introduced me to those kids. NAB supported me by giving me a purpose. They made me useful. They supported me more than they think. A feeling of humility came over me as I began to remember.

Today, I do community service through a club at my school called KEY Club. I am the president of this club because of my positive experiences toward the community. KEY Club is just a means to an end. Volunteer work is a lesson in life. I believe that it teaches patience, listening, and compassion. To adopt

such qualities is to become an effective leader, teacher, and worker. Through my experiences, I learned that being good is not enough if we have the capacity to help others and make a difference in the lives of others.

The Neighborhood Accountability Board stood there in my mind while I was doing community service with my club. And, coincidentally, NAB contacted me; they were inviting me to a volunteers' dinner and they wanted me to give a speech about my experiences. "Of course I would," I responded. "Nothing in the world would make me happier!" With everything that's happened to me, I had found a voice inside. I had faced all kinds of things; I had been tested in so many ways. I collected all of this courage, and now people were going to listen to what I had to say.

Now, when Colleen told me it was a volunteers' dinner, I was expecting maybe 10 or 20 people. When the night arrived, I found myself in a large banquet hall with over 200 volunteers and family members. It touched my heart to have the opportunity to tell my story to so many people. And I am grateful that so many people care.

I walked on stage and talked about my experiences with NAB.

I know that I am no longer capable of doing wrong ever again in my life. If you saw what I did, you would know what I feel. I have a responsibility to every one of those volunteers. I know how disappointed each one of them would be if I did something bad. So I simply don't, because I know that there are people out there who care about the way I live my life. I know that there are people who care about the way I turn out, the way I grow up. I just want them to know that, in return, I am forever thankful.